

## Community Involvement in Mali: A Key to Strengthening Civil Society

In 1991, World Education began working in Mali for USAID with a broad mandate: to build and strengthen local institutions so they would better serve their communities. Determining how best to achieve this goal was the first order of business. Mali was then recovering from a period of political upheaval that had incapacitated its schools and many other public institutions.

Educational statistics reflected the magnitude of the problem: Only 10% of the country's 12,000 villages had primary schools, and only 44% of school-aged children were enrolled in school. Mali's illiteracy rate was one of the highest among African countries, at approximately 68%<sup>1</sup>.

As part of its initial research, World Education reached out to communities to explore their needs and aspirations. The research eventually pointed to a course of action that promised to strengthen Mali's civil society at the local level. A plan emerged that centered on parents associations, which played a government-sanctioned role in overseeing and supporting schools in communities throughout the country. At the time, viewing parents associations as pivotal to achieving sustainable economic and social progress was not a well established principle among international development professionals.

### *The Program's Beginnings*

World Education commenced its inquiry with an urban revitalization program in Mali's capital city, Bamako. Working with 60 local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), World Education trained NGO staff in community development methods. The NGOs then assessed the needs of residents in each of the city's neighborhoods, and worked with community volunteers to drain and clean school grounds, and build school latrines.

The Ministry of Education was providing education development funds to community groups under the condition that *Associations des Parents des Elèves* (APEs)—Parents of Students Associations—manage the money (despite the name, the parents associations also consist of community members who may or may not be parents).

Giving APEs financial control was not a popular idea, because they were legal entities that existed mostly on paper. Where they operated at all, they were tainted by their association with Mali's corrupt former regime. They had a reputation for financial mismanagement, cronyism, and patronage. Women participated in the APEs less than men, which reflected women's higher rate of illiteracy, and status in Mali society.

Along with its NGO partners, however, World Education came to see the APEs as a potential catalyst for revitalizing Malian schools, beginning at the grassroots level. A strategy was developed to implement a program to build the APEs into an effective

---

<sup>1</sup> Human Development Report 1993, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), New York, Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1993. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1993/chapters/>

community-based force improving Mali's schools, and at the same time, expand literacy and foster a general sense of civic responsibility among adults.

In the program's first phase—which lasted from 1991 to 1994—World Education observed a few dynamic APEs to ascertain why they were successful, and worked with 100 government schools in the regions of Bamako and Koulikoro, and collaborated with NGOs to train their staff. Next, World Education designed and implemented pilot-training courses for the APEs, emphasizing communication and management skills, including receiving and managing funds for school improvement projects. To initiate the rebuilding of APEs, NGO field staff used traditional community mobilization tactics: Traveling door-to-door with information campaigns, and conducting communal meetings. Community volunteers also pitched in, recruiting new APE members.

In response to requests from people in the participating communities, World Education instituted adult literacy classes, which supported and strengthened the skills training for APE members. Initially, World Education built the capacity of its Malian staff to develop and implement a program based on best practices of nonformal literacy education, and adapted to local circumstances.

The course was divided into two phases—basic literacy and post-literacy—which was taught by a volunteer teacher from the community, and supervised by the APEs. In the first phase, class members working in small groups started each lesson by analyzing a social problem as a gateway to learning literacy fundamentals. The second phase introduced content specific to the roles and responsibilities of APE members.

One priority was enrolling illiterate APE board members and illiterate mothers in the courses. Another was imparting math proficiency, which has a practical payoff for the participants in that they could apply what they learned in class to their daily lives. Furthermore, exposing the APE members to school also made them better role models for their children, helped them gain a better understanding of their children's needs in school, and deepened their interest in the education of girls.

Elections were held to choose APE officers, and create committees with specific mandates. These committees were trained in such tasks as how to manage a budget, keep records, and communicate with school administrators. Workshops to refine those skills followed. To provide additional follow-up, two NGO field workers were assigned to each village, and visited at least once a week.

To reinvent the APEs, the NGOs worked with them to revamp their membership requirements, upgrade their governance regulations, and strengthen their capacity for collective action.

Traditionally, the APEs limited their role to raising funds and monitoring the maintenance of schools buildings. Once reconstituted under the World Education program, they widened their scope markedly to include such things as providing

scholarships for impoverished pupils, making their voices heard in the recruiting and even firing of teachers, and generally advocating for parents on education issues.

Local APEs are embedded in a network of APE organizations on the district, regional, and national levels. This network represents their lower-level constituents and advocates on issues that are important to them. Building the APE federation into an effectively-functioning, tiered system of shared responsibility was another priority of the World Education strategy. Now, we're working to improve education quality through school governance.

#### *Implementing a full-fledged program*

To fulfill the larger mission of promoting civic governance in Mali while improving schools, World Education sought and received \$9.6 million in USAID funds to expand the program—called **Development of Community Institutions**—to additional regions, including Mopti, Segou, and Sikasso. In addition, more government schools in Bamako and Koulikoro were included, as well as 500 community schools in those regions. Mali's community schools are privately created and managed by communities or associations. Like the government schools, community schools have to adhere to the teacher qualification and curricular standards set by the Ministry of Education, and operate in concert with APEs.

#### *Impact of scaling up*

As the program evolved, it became apparent that it had a wider impact on Mali's development than World Education had initially envisioned. As the APEs learned the principles of financial management, they were exposed to fundamental notions of good governance, transparency, and mutual accountability, and applied those lessons to their civic involvement. The APEs thus became more than a vehicle for school improvement; They served as civic-society organizations restoring confidence in public services, and mobilizing communities in the governance of those services.

#### *Recap and lessons learned*

The World Education Development of Community Institutions program in Mali achieved its purpose of strengthening the capacity of APEs to function as sustainable organizations, enabling them to promote educational access, quality, and equity in their communities. Among the hallmarks of the enhanced APE capacity was smoother technical functioning and a more active role played by women who participated in them.

To reinforce APE federations, 193 were trained and supported in 2001-2002 at the commune level, and 20 at the district level. The new schools—with the backing of the APEs—added a total of 105,000 students to their enrollments. The program also responded with initiatives that aided in the hiring and training of 2,121 teachers. As of June 2003, 1,100 APEs had been reconstituted, trained, and supported under the World Education program, which helped establish 790 community schools, and bolstered APEs at 356 government schools.

The final evaluation of the program concluded that World Education's approach was "highly successful" in increasing children's access to primary schools. Parental involvement in the APEs coincided with improved student achievement. For example, the passing rate of primary school pupils in World Education-supported jurisdictions was 67%<sup>2</sup>, compared to a national average of 55%. No definitive causal link is provable, and factors other than parental involvement may have played a part in the results. But the favorable trend in test scores had the notable effect of intensifying parental support for World Education's program.

Another study<sup>3</sup> looked at the outcome of the World Education program. It found that 97% of the 463 APE respondents surveyed said that through the training courses and APE participation, they had learned important skills such as keeping meeting minutes, and managing funds. In addition, 92% of 455 respondents said that the World Education program had shaped the APEs for the better in important ways. Among the gains cited were improved financial management systems, more frequent meetings, and greater credibility for their associations because of record management transparency. According to a study<sup>4</sup> of how often APEs met, respondents' impressions appear to be well founded; While the World Education program was under way, the proportion of APEs meeting at least 10 times per year jumped from 44% to 87%.

As for the key question of whether the enhanced effectiveness of the APEs was sustainable, the signs thus far are promising. One indication: in 2001, two years after World Education phased-out its program in Koulikoro, the APEs in the region were still functioning. Today, these APEs are still in existence.

Since the program operated largely on the grassroots level, the involvement of the Ministry of Education was minimal. To promote APE sustainability will likely require a larger role for the ministry as a substitute for World Education's program in Mali.

The program in Mali has had repercussions well beyond the country's borders, benefiting World Education programs in both Africa and Asia. It has become a model for programs initiated in Benin, Guinea, and Namibia, and with further refinements, is the basis for programs in southern Africa, Egypt, Cambodia, and Nepal.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cissé et al, 2000, Ramin, 2001, cited in Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Gilboy and Doumbia, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> World Education, 2003.