Facilitating Education in Mali

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**Mali is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world. Douentza is the poorest district in Mali- 90% of the population live below the poverty line. Over half the population in this country is children. Mali has a rich history and culture. It has produced Islamic scholars, world-renowned musicians, and is home to world-renowned historic cities.**

**The term 'poverty' needs to be carefully and clearly understood; economic and material indicators do not reflect the value and richness of human life, culture and tradition.**

This article demonstrates how education, and inclusive education, in a context such as Mali, cannot be understood in isolation from broader issues such as survival, food security, agriculture and the overall condition and future of children's lives within their community. Some of the issues affecting children in this part of the world were harsh environmental conditions threatening their survival and nutrition; the lack of basic services such as water, health and education, and the impact of the HIV pandemic were identified. Women, children, people with disabilities, those who are HIV positive and nomads/semi-nopmdas were also identified as being particularly vulnerable. Certain castes and ethnic groups are excluded or discriminated against.

According to the International Labour Organisation Mali has the second highest rate of child labour in the world. However, most young children who worked did not think their work as oppressive or abusive. It won them approval and they were given considerable responsibility. It was felt that parents who prevented their children working did not have their children's best interests at heart. Therefore, programmes in this area should not create unnecessary competition between schooling and work.

**Children's work is perceived as educational and as a process of socialisation; initiating them into skills which will enable them to support themselves, their parents, and contribute to the community.**

In Douentza, only 8% of children attend school compared to the national average of 44%. Out of 255 villages, only 17 have schools. The poorest families still cannot access these schools. Children of the poorest families are not likely to attend schools. Other marginalised groups such as disabled children are of course least likely to get access to any sort of education. Poverty impinges on every aspect of educational provision. However, without a school education, children in these villages have very little chance of escaping a lifetime of rural poverty. The classic vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion.

**Access to schooling is seen by SCF staff in Douentza as 'part of a wider set of activities intended to strengthen the resilience of village children in the face of pressures of poverty.'**

In this situation, barriers to inclusive education are numerous. The government lacks the necessary resources to provide education for all in Mali. A World Bank evaluation of sub-Saharan education programmes showed that there was little sustained impact at classroom level when external donors channelled funds through governments. New and re-furbished schools are found semi-derelict with no teachers a couple of years after intervention. In addition, the curriculum in Mali is rigid and resources are stretched. French is the language of instruction and is not understood by children.

Despite the obstacles, villagers in Douentza wanted their children to go to school. In the SCF study 70% of children and adults stated they would prefer a different future to that of their parents, for which they believed schooling would prepare them. Various reasons were given for children not attending school including the absence of schools in the village, work responsibilities, inability to pay and parents' unwillingness to send their children to schools.

**Access to education cannot be considered separately from issues of quality and relevance.**

The Save the Children Fund education project in Mali is a conscious experiment with a bottom up approach to see if this would enable schooling to be made more accessible to children. In January 1997, Save the Children Fund set up a consultation process with government, donors, NGOs and village communities. State education professionals would provide input on curriculum and methodology. A feasibility study was conducted and two villages were selected to take part, one in each of the main language groups.

School Committees were formed and trained, teachers were selected. Guiding principles were established. These included: the allocation of half the places to girls, the inclusion of children with disabilities from the start, selection and training of teachers from the community and the adaptation of the school curriculum and materials by villagers themselves in order to reflect village children's experiences.

The inclusion of children with disabilities into the pilot schools meant that specific knowledge and information about disability would be needed. Save the Children Fund involved a specialist non-governmental organisation from the beginning. Action on Disability and Development (ADD) aims to support the development of Disabled People's Organisations and to promote the rights of disabled people within their local culture and context. ADD worked with SCF in the identification of children with disabilities and enabled the school committees to identify those who were of school-going age who could be enrolled.

The programme has had an impact on the lives of children with disabilities, their families and the community. There are now 11 children with disabilities in the two community schools. Teachers are learning to support and manage inclusion. Children with disabilities are, for the first time, visible in the community and parents are bringing their children out into the open. The process has not been without its difficulties. Some of the children have had to drop out of the schools as a result of organisational and attitudinal barriers.

The difficulty with disability work in communities is that without community involvement/participation the programme will not be relevant and sustainable. Sometimes the community does not prioritise disability as an issue. This may have something to do with the absence of positive examples and good role models that offer alternatives to the present situation. In this case an outside agent may need to advocate for inclusion. In the Mali example, Save the Children Fund and ADD were the catalysts that insisted that the community schools should be inclusive from the start. In the words of the chairperson of one of the school committees;

**"To begin with we had the commitment to include disabled children, but we did not really believe that they could be in school. Now we have seen for ourselves, and we have moved from commitment to conviction."**

**Reference:**
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